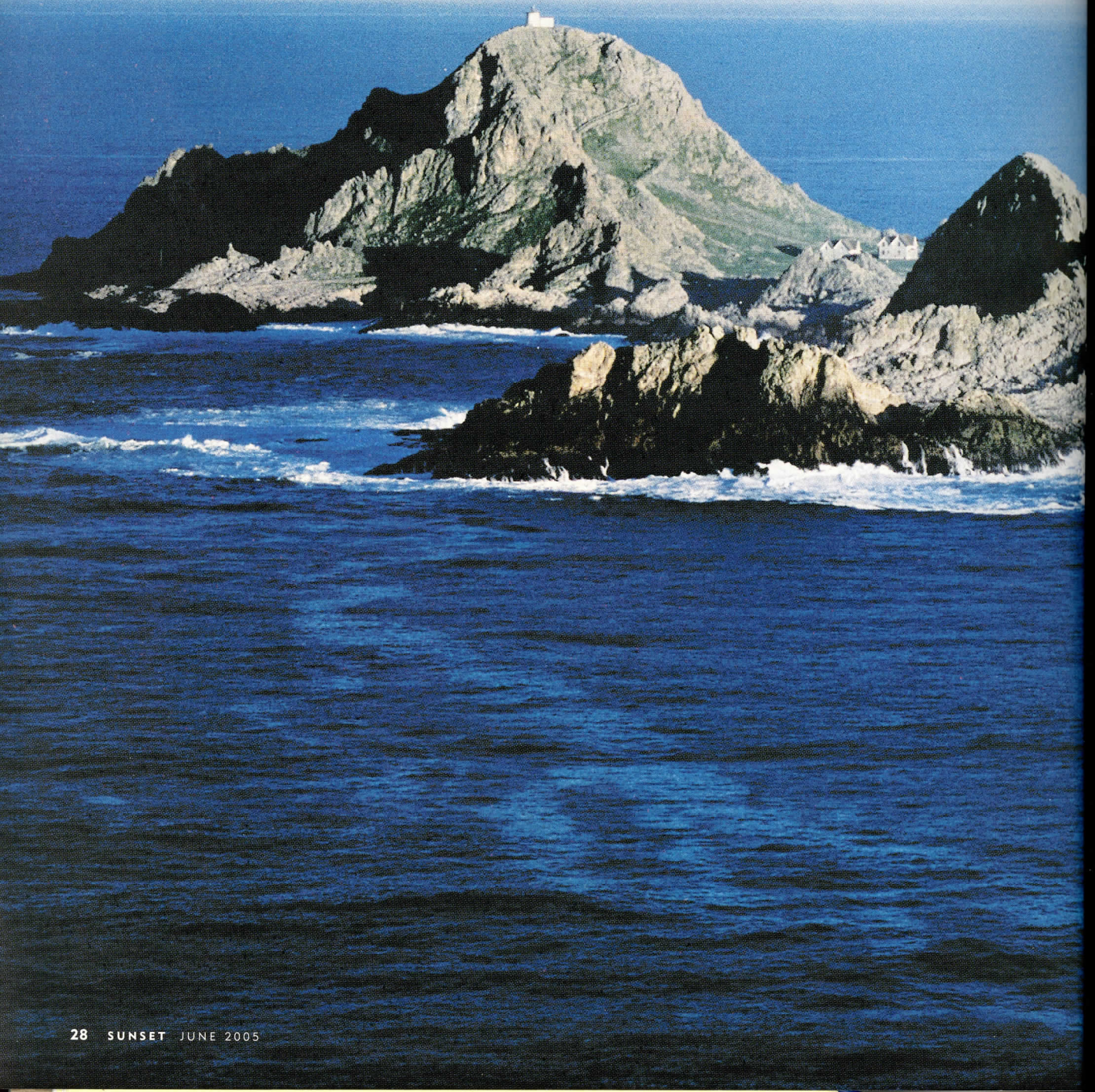


San Francisco's Farallon Islands are mysterious, wild, and remote, but a new book has put them in the spotlight. Its author, **SUSAN CASEY**, explains why this lonely place needs to be studied, marveled at—and left alone



The Jagged Edge



The world's wildest places do not ordinarily sit in the backyards of its most populous cities, but the Farallon Islands, an archipelago of 10 rocky islets 27 miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge, are anything but ordinary. Visitors approaching by boat have been known to gasp when they first glimpse the islands jutting abruptly from the Pacific. For centuries, the very sight of their cruel granite towers—nearly devoid of vegetation, cloaked by fog, and battered by storms—has inspired fear. Coast Miwok Indians called them the “Islands of the Dead.” Nineteenth-century sailors, who knew them as a notorious



graveyard of wrecked ships, dubbed them the “Devil’s Teeth.”

Despite the haunting reputation of years past, the islands are teeming with life, drawing researchers and the simply daring to a unique and fragile ecosystem. But the increasing attention focused on this small archipelago sparks an emotional debate that has far-reaching ramifications. How do we learn from the secrets of our wildest places but still keep them remote?



The jagged topography of the Devil’s Teeth does not invite a person to kick back and stay awhile, and neither do the regulations. The islands are a tightly protected National Wildlife Refuge within a National Marine Sanctuary. The public may not step ashore, and for good reason: Every patch of land is claimed by nesting seabirds, and a single misplaced footstep could crush a burrow, or worse, a chick. Steep rock walls have made building a dock impossible, so researchers coming ashore must be plucked out of the water by crane, a tricky process that’s not for the fainthearted. The total human population of the Farallones is strictly capped at eight—all biologists from PRBO Conservation Science, a local organization that monitors the islands in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For ornithologists, a stint at PRBO’s Farallon field station is a sort of feathered heaven. Sixty-five-acre Southeast Farallon Island, a stretch of rock the size of a few city blocks, is home to the country’s largest seabird colony outside Alaska. And sightings of rare vagrant land birds, off course in their migrations, are a regular occurrence. Birds that ought to be at the North Pole or winging their way over Asia instead blunder down to the lighthouse or land in one of the island’s three small trees.

Offshore, the wildlife is equally impressive, and

All whale-watching boats and other tourist charters must stay at least 300 feet offshore to protect wildlife. Humpback whales and tufted puffins thrive in the islands’ nutrient-rich environment.

Farallon biologists often witness extraordinary natural spectacles. In January 1998, a pod of dolphins conservatively estimated at 1,000 strong cruised past the islands, taking more than three minutes to pass. And on one particularly fine October day, biologists counted 61 blue whales feeding in nearby waters.

All the animals are here for one reason: food. The islands are perched at the ragged edge of the continental shelf, right before it plunges more than 2 miles down to the abyssal plain. The upwelling of cold, nutrient-rich water at this ledge makes the location a showcase for the entire food chain, from microscopic plankton to the ocean’s most magnificent predator, the great white shark.

“They are here, and they are hungry,” reads the Farallon logbook entry for October 7, 1998. It’s a typical note for that time of year: Each fall, white sharks arrive at the Farallones, attracted by the northern elephant-seal colony and clusters of California sea lions, harbor seals, and even a smattering of endangered Steller sea lions. The sharks remain for about three months, disappearing in winter and then reappearing in September. Charter fishing-boat captain Brian Guiles, who makes frequent trips past the islands, spots the animals with regularity: “They’re huge. I want to say like a Volkswagen.”

That a large, stable population of mature white sharks lives within the 415 area code comes as a surprise to most people. But since 1987, PRBO biologists and other shark scientists have been conducting cutting-edge research on the Farallones’ sharks. Among their discoveries is this startling fact: Year after year, it’s the *same* sharks that are showing up. To date, about 100 individuals have been identified—and in some cases satellite tagged—their appearances and behaviors meticulously documented. This virtual

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neighborhood of white sharks within a protected area offers something found nowhere else on earth: the chance to study them in their natural environment, unaffected by chumming or baiting. As a result, the researchers have gotten to know the predators one-on-one.

"It's unexpected to get on a personal level with the sharks," says Scot Anderson, one of the Farallones' long-term white-shark researchers. Observers have noted, for instance, that Cuttail, a 15-foot male, is feisty, and Whiteslash, an 18-foot female, is mellow and likes to hang around the research boat. They know that Half-Fin is goofy, and Gouge is aggressive, and Cal Ripfin is sneaky and tries to steal seal carcasses from other sharks.

It's a revelation that the white shark, presumed to be a diabolical eating machine, is a more nuanced creature. But there's still so much more to learn. Surprisingly, in a time when we've decoded the human genome, the biology of white sharks remains a puzzle, and the missing pieces include even basic information such as the animal's average life span.

Understandably, people are intrigued by this forgotten corner of California. For visitors hearty enough to withstand a bone-jarring eight-hour voyage, a day trip aboard one of the whale-watching vessels that loop around the area is deeply rewarding. And for now, this is one of the only legal ways



Teeming with life yet hauntingly bare: The Farallones are home to tens of thousands of black-and-white common murrens. White sharks feed offshore.

for the public to get close to the Farallones. In recent months, a bill in Congress proposed allowing more casual access, but thankfully this shortsighted plan seems to have gone away. It would be heartbreakingly easy to love the islands to death.

Over the decades, the Farallones have taken a drubbing at human hands. In the early 19th century, fur traders wiped out its seals; during the Gold Rush, a lucrative and larcenous trade in seabird eggs killed millions of common murrens. And then, between 1947 and 1970, the

Navy deposited 47,500 barrels of low-level radioactive waste into the surrounding waters. It was only when the entire group of islands was designated a National Wildlife Refuge in 1969 that the Farallones and their wildlife finally got a break. Slowly, some populations are beginning to show signs of recovery.

For Westerners, the stakes are high. The Farallones sit in a precarious position, right in the middle of several busy shipping lanes, next to a metropolis. In protecting these islands, we're protecting something deeply important. "I think it touches a place in people that is long forgotten," says biologist Phil Henderson, who spent 17 seasons at the islands. "Our wild side." ★

Susan Casey is development editor for Time Inc. (Sunset's parent company). Her book The Devil's Teeth: A True Story of Obsession and Survival Among America's Great White Sharks is being published this month by Henry Holt & Company. Naturalist-led whale-watching trips to the Farallones are run Sat-Sun Jun-Nov by the Oceanic Society (\$85, no children under 10; www.oceanic-society.org or 415/474-3385).